
BLACKFISH

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There is a fish that lives in very deep, very cold rivers. Their taste is strong, pungent, oily. They are caught in weighted traps that fall, then rest somewhere near the muddy bottom. The traps are left for days. In winter, when the tops of rivers freeze, blackfish push their plump bellies down into the mud, as far from the ice as they can get. They wait. They are never seen swimming in their rivers. They don't jump up into the air to break their egg sacks like salmon or to catch bugs like trout. People know they are there because they know they are there.

When blackfish are hauled up in traps, they are motionless and then they are stored in buckets. 3, 5, 6, 7 blackfish can lay in the bottom of an average bucket. They lay there, belly down. They don't flop, they don't roll off, heaving, to one side. They don't fight the air. They press their plump bellies down on the bottom of the bucket, holding themselves in the fish kind of upright. I imagine that they imagine the top of the bucket covered with ice, the bottom covered with mud.

Blackfish can lay in the bottom of a bucket, sitting on a porch for months; no water, no mud, no food, no fish air. They lay there, on their bellies, still. But when brought back to their river, when held in their very deep, very cold water, when gently primed in the cups of two human hands, the blackfish heaves, its sides pulse, its head moves from side to side, and then, it swims away.

My cousin told me about the time he tried studying blackfish for the science fair at school. It was spring. He put his blackfish trap down into the river and waited two days. He caught four blackfish. He placed these in his bucket which he placed in the back mud room of the house near the dog food. He had to wait until fall.

I said you can eat blackfish, that their taste is strong, pungent, oily. You can, but you eat them raw, and you eat them head in. Head in your mouth. It's as if you eat the blackfish while, at the same time, the blackfish swims to your belly.

My cousin didn't eat his spring caught blackfish. He wanted to study them. To open them. To see the guts, the bones that seem to dissolve with spit. He imagined blood and a heart and lungs. He wanted to pin the blackfish open, draw a picture, label parts, find out how they sit themselves upright in the bottom of buckets, why they never surface their rivers, how they come to life after months pressed into mud. He took one blackfish and held it in his hand. He didn't wake it. He took a knife, and he cut it. From anus to head, up the belly. But he didn't see lungs or guts or blood. He held the knife in his right hand, the blackfish in his left, but after the cut, he couldn't hold onto the fish. It dissolved in his hand, became a kind of thick, black, liquid goo. He tried to stop it from slipping between his fingers, but the blackfish goo got heavier as it dripped toward the floor and the whole mess of it slid off his palm, gathering in a puddle at his feet.

He tried another.

Same thing.

"If you cannot cut a blackfish open to look at its insides, can you study its insides?" he asked me. But he didn't give me time to answer.

Instead, he continued, "I couldn't cut another. I ate my last two blackfish. And I ate the blackfish that were sitting upright in my father's bucket, the ones he caught for feasting in late winter.

Emily, I ate 5 blackfish," he said.

"Good god," I said.

No one eats 5 blackfish.

You eat ONE, for health, but my cousin thought that if he ate alot of blackfish he could find out about the blackfish soul. About what they dream during the ice over. About their survival through the harshest conditions; laying in buckets in homes, away from the deep, cold habitat of river and mud. About their swim down our throats. He thought there was something the blackfish could teach him that he could, maybe, in turn, teach his family and friends and teacher at school.

But the blackfish made him puke. It poured out of his mouth, swam over his tongue, that same thick, black liquid goo he felt slipping through his fingers. It pulled out of him, leaving him

feeling cleaner than before, but with a horrible taste in his mouth. He lay down, belly pressed to the floor. He couldn't move, so he fell asleep.

He told me, "The blackfish are unstudyable. They exist to live in rivers, and buckets, and bellies. You cannot cut a blackfish. Please, do not try. You cannot eat too many. Trust me, don't. But, when the blackfish enters your dreams, you hold still and listen to what it says. It will tell you when to swim, head first into danger, it will tell you when to press your belly down wherever you are, and rest. It will tell you how to survive this world. It will tell you its secrets."